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IMPROVEMENT OF THE INTERNATIONAL RESPONSE TO ENVIRONMENTAL EMERGENCIES

Report of the Executive Director

Summary

The present report reviews the implementation of Governing Council decision 17/26, which called for the development of a mechanism to improve the United Nations capacity to respond to environmental emergencies. UNEP and the United Nations Department of Humanitarian Affairs established the Joint UNEP/DHA Environment Unit following recommendations of a UNEP Governmental Advisory Meeting. The Joint Unit is facilitating the provision of international assistance, it is staffed by UNEP and is fully integrated into the existing response mechanism of the DHA Relief Coordination Branch, which has the mandate to respond to emergencies. This is a practical project which provides an independent backstop for countries facing environmental emergencies.

Suggested action by the Governing Council

The Governing Council may wish to:

1. Take note of the present report;

2. Express its satisfaction with and endorse constructive collaboration between UNEP and DHA in enhancing the ability of the United Nations to assist countries affected by environmental emergencies;

3. Welcome the establishment of the Joint UNEP/DHA Environment Unit;

4. Express its appreciation to DHA for providing the Joint Unit with emergency facilities and office space;

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5. Note that the Joint Unit is rendering services in full accordance with recommendations of the UNEP Governmental Advisory Meeting, when international assistance is not otherwise provided within the framework of relevant existing conventions;

6. Welcome the establishment of the Advisory Group on Environmental Emergencies, and endorse its terms of reference;

7. Request the Joint Unit to further develop its activities and services in accordance with recommendations of the Advisory Group on Environmental Emergencies;

8. Invite Governments and relevant UN agencies, bodies and programmes to cooperate with the Joint Unit in its efforts to provide independent and unbiased assistance to countries facing environmental emergencies;

9. Request the Executive Director to allocate the necessary resources for the implementation of activities of the Joint Unit;

10. Further request the Executive Director to submit to the Governing Council at its nineteenth session a progress report on the implementation of the present decision.

I. INTRODUCTION

1. In accordance with Governing Council decision 17/26 of 21 May 1993, extensive work has been undertaken to assess the needs of developing countries in terms of response to emergencies that affect or threaten the environment, and to examine current international response mechanisms. Gaps in the existing system has been identified and proposals made to rectify the situation. Extensive consultations with Governments identified the most appropriate needs These include the need to utilize in the most efficient manner existing facilities and resources, the need to facilitate quick direct links between affected countries and potential providers of assistance and the need for rapid initial assessment in cases of accident. Countries indicated a preference for a simple mechanism in the United Nations to expedite the delivery of such assistance, including a single entry point to the system.

2. As requested by the Governing Council, a Governmental Advisory Meeting was convened by UNEP in November 1993. It adopted a set of proposals concerning the enhancement of the international response capacity to augment the existing international response system.

3. Taking into account these recommendations, as well as consultations with countries and United Nations bodies, UNEP and the Department of Humanitarian Affairs (DHA) decided to simplify to the maximum extent possible the administrative and technical arrangements that would permit the delivery of an environmental emergency service to the international community. It was jointly recommended by the two bodies that core activities and services should be funded and provided by UNEP through the existing organizational framework of the Relief Coordination Branch of DHA.

4. Under these arrangements, UNEP retains substantive responsibility for the work to be done and functions in an effective operational association with DHA. In accordance with this joint recommendation, a small Joint UNEP/DHA Environment Unit ("the Joint Unit") was established in DHA as of 1 July 1994, to deal with environmental aspects of emergencies. The Human Health and Welfare Unit was appointed focal point for the Joint Unit within UNEP headquarters.

5. At its 45th meeting, the Committee of Permanent Representatives to UNEP at its 45th meeting, considered the report of the Executive Director on the Joint Unit, endorsed the joint recommendation of UNEP and DHA, and requested the Executive Director to implement it for an initial period of 12 months and refer the question back to the Governing Council at its eighteenth session.

II. ACTIVITIES AND SERVICES PROVIDED BY THE JOINT UNEP/DHA ENVIRONMENT UNIT

6. Taking into account rapid industrial development in different regions, it is understood that major beneficiaries of the implementation of this project are Governments of developing countries and countries with economies in transition, competent national organizations, industrial associations, as well as relevant United Nations agencies and international organizations.

7. The objective of this joint project is to deliver an environmental emergency service to Governments upon request. In full accordance with the recommendations of the UNEP Governmental Advisory Meeting, it aims to improve mobilization and coordination of the international response to environmental emergencies, by developing and implementing practical brokerage functions, and establishing an efficient information clearing-house. Other assistance tools include the provision of independent and quick initial and post-emergency assessment, utilizing resources of donating countries and partners. Since its establishment, as well as in the preceding experimental stage, the Joint Unit has assisted a number of countries in responding to a variety of environmental emergencies by using its tools and capabilities.